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SUBJECT: ICRC PRESIDENT TO VISIT UZBEKISTAN

REF: TASHKENT 253

Classified By: Political Officer Tim Buckley for reasons 1.4 (B,D)

1. (C) Summary: International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) Head of Regional Delegation in Central Asia Yves Giovannoni and Deputy Head Raffaello Muller requested a meeting with the Ambassador on February 28 to discuss ICRC's new agreement with the Government of Uzbekistan to resume prison visits. Giovannoni attributed the breakthrough to the Ambassador's persistence in convincing the Uzbek side to come to the table, and he thanked the Ambassador for his efforts. We noted that ICRC's principled stand, and Admiral Fallon's willingness to meet with ICRC during his visit, also no doubt played significant roles. Giovannoni confirmed that a note verbale finalizing the agreement was presented to the Uzbeks in Geneva on February 21 and includes the key elements ICRC has long sought: respect for the modalities per a 2001 signed agreement; appointment of a liaison in the Government of Uzbekistan to facilitate exchanges of information; a substantive dialogue on prison visit reports; and access to all detention facilities in Uzbekistan (not just those under the jurisdiction of the Interior Ministry). Giovannoni maintains a healthy skepticism but expects the initial phase of the six-month trial period to go smoothly. A highlight of the trial period will be a visit to Uzbekistan by ICRC President Jakob Kellenberger, who intends to meet with President Karimov on a Central Asia tour that will also

include Afghanistan and Tajikistan. ICRC also discussed its desire to provide training for militarized interior troops and implement a counter-tuberculosis program in the long-term. The Government of Uzbekistan's willingness to make a deal with ICRC after a long stalemate demonstrates that engagement with the Uzbeks can pay dividends, although we will watch carefully to make sure they hold up their end of the bargain. End summary.

ICRC thanks U.S. for our support

12. (C) Giovannoni and Muller requested a meeting with the Ambassador on February 28, immediately after learning that the Government of Uzbekistan had informed the Ambassador about a breakthrough agreement with ICRC that ended a long stalemate (reftel). Giovannoni congratulated us and thanked the Ambassador for past efforts to convince the Uzbeks to come to the table, and noted that "the U.S. arguments must have been strong." We expressed appreciation but noted that ICRC's principled stand was also a powerful factor, and reminded them that Admiral Fallon's willingness to meet with ICRC during his January visit had made a strong impression on the Uzbeks. ICRC's Mission in Washington plans to inform the State Department in the near future about the renewed visit regime.

A Six-Month Trial Period

13. (C) Giovannoni confirmed that the agreement stipulates a six-month trial period of prison visits, which could begin as early as March 11. ICRC had planned to announce the visit after the first day of the first visit but wanted to elaborate for the U.S. Embassy since the Uzbeks had now broken the news to us. The agreement was just finalized with an exchange of notes verbale in Geneva on February 21, and Giovannoni and Muller were surprised that the Uzbeks promptly shared the information with post on February 26. Giovannoni added that he "doesn't fully trust" the Uzbeks after a "bumpy" relationship from 2001 to 2004 followed by three years of negotiations, but he is pleased by the new agreement and said ICRC will be "flexible and lenient" during the trial period.

Elements of the Deal

14. (C) ICRC is satisfied that it got the commitments in the new agreement which it had long sought from the Uzbek side, specifically: respect for the standard international modalities, as established in the original 2001 agreement; appointment of a liaison within the Government of Uzbekistan "who can intervene" in communications breakdowns; a "substantive dialogue" on prison visit reports; and access to all detention facilities in the country. Muller stressed that the contact needs to be in the Presidential Apparatus, which is the only entity which can effectively coordinate across all of the different ministries with whom ICRC will have contact.

Expect Smooth Sailing...At First

15. (C) Giovannoni has "the sense that there is an order from the top to comply," at least during the initial phase of the trial period. He expects the first month to be particularly smooth, but there will be challenges ahead as the three ICRC teams (plus a physician) attempt to gain unfettered access to the estimated 200 detention facilities around the country holding approximately 40,000 prisoners. He noted that the Ministry of Internal Affairs (MVD) Penitentiary Directorate is not the only entity that operates jails, and ICRC will insist on accessing other facilities -- including those administered by the National Security Service (NSS) -- to ensure that prisoners are not merely transferred away from the MVD prisons to sidestep ICRC visits. Giovannoni concluded that "a key test will be whether we can access the other places."

ICRC President Plans Visit

16. (C) Another reason the initial phase of the prison visit regime should be smooth is that ICRC President Kellenberger is planning to visit Uzbekistan in April 16-17 as part of a Central Asia trip that will include stops in Tajikistan and Afghanistan. Giovannoni said ICRC will accept nothing less than a meeting with President Karimov. (Comment: We believe Karimov will agree to the meeting, especially given how eager

the Uzbek Government was to break the news about the new agreement to us. The meeting will be a high-profile platform for Karimov to draw attention to progress on human rights. End comment.)

Correcting Mistakes of Andijon

17. (C) Giovannoni noted that ICRC would like to be more involved in other aspects of human rights development in Uzbekistan, and he specifically mentioned a desire to focus on training for the MVD's militarized troops. He noted that there are differences between generations within the Ministry, with Soviet-trained commanders who prioritize the role of defending state security on one hand and younger officers who seem more open to reform and a focus on law enforcement on the other. Giovannoni cited the government's Andijon response and stressed the importance of training interior troops in "what to do when there is a rioting crowd" and the fundamentals of "the use of force during initial arrest and detention." ICRC now has a law enforcement expert based in the Tashkent regional office; however, Giovannoni noted that such programs are still a tough sell throughout Central Asia. He also expressed concern that Central Asian countries, within the framework of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) have discussed the establishment of mutual rapid deployment of troops to help each other "quell demonstrations." However, this also represented an opportunity for reform and modern training methods to be introduced. (Note: Press reporting indicated the arrangement was aimed at quelling major riots and violent incidents. End note.)

No Prison Tuberculosis Projects Yet

18. (C) Muller clarified that ICRC will not be able to embark on any projects to address the serious tuberculosis problems in Uzbekistan prisons due to the short timeframe of the six-month trial agreement. He noted that effective programs are time and resource intensive, and there must also be strong access guarantees to ensure that identified infected persons cannot be transferred to healthy populations. ICRC is pleased by early positive outcomes of a three-year project in Kyrgyzstan, in which the death rate has already "significantly dropped." Anti-tuberculosis projects also require World Health Organization (WHO) approval, and treatment costs for complex drug-resistant cases can exceed USD 3,000 per person over the required treatment timeframe. Nonetheless, if the trial period is successful, ICRC is interested in pursuing a long-term tuberculosis project in Uzbekistan.

Comment:

19. (C) As reported in reftel, this is a potentially very significant positive step forward in the human rights situation in Uzbekistan. The ICRC representatives, despite their warranted skepticism, were sincere in congratulating us on what they termed a major accomplishment. It took the Uzbeks a long time but, when presented with a clear "menu" of achievable steps forward, they eventually recognized that ICRC prison visits were in their best interest and came to the table. This breakthrough demonstrates that the strategy of engaging the Uzbeks can pay dividends, if not always promptly. As this agreement becomes public knowledge we will certainly give the Uzbeks modest credit where credit is due but, like ICRC, we will maintain our healthy skepticism and make sure the Government of Uzbekistan follows through on its end of the bargain.

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